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A DISCOURSE ON THE ABUSE OF THE TALENT OF DISPUTATION in RELIGION,

Particularly as practiced by

Dr. PRIESTLY, Mr. GIBBON,

And others of the modern Sect of Philosophic Christians.

Preached in the CATHEDRAL CHURCH, NORWICH, at the primary Visitation of the Right Reverend LEWIS Lord Bishop of the Diocese, on June 23, 1784.

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First Epiſtle to TIMOTHY, I. V.

The end of the Commandment is Charity, out of a pure heart, and of a good conſcience and faith unfeigned, from which ſome having ſwerved, have turned aſide unto vain jangling.

I NEED not mention to this intelligent and learned audience, that Charity, in the extenſive ſenſe wherein the ſacred writers uſe the word, includes the practice of all the ſocial duties of men to each other, not only as men, but as rational men, improved by civil and religious inſtitutions, in order to render them more friendly fellow-creatures, and more virtuous fellow-chriſtians: Now this better inſtruction of men in the whole circle of their practical duties, it was the very end and aim of the revealed commandment by Chriſt to promote, as St. Paul here in the text reminds us "The end of the commandment (ſays he) is charity;" and then he immediately proceeds to point out ſome of thoſe chief qualifications of the mind and heart, which if they accompany our endeavours

deavours after the end of the chriſtian commandment, will aſſiſt us in our *ſpeculations* as well as *practice*, and thereby give to our acquiſitions the ſummit of perfection. Of theſe qualifications he mentions three, namely, "That our motives and endeavours ſhould proceed out of a pure heart, and a good conſcience, and a faith unfeigned;" or in other words, That *firſt* of all the *intentions* of men ſhould be ſincerely directed to this object of promoting the end of the Chriſtian Commandment, and not be perverted either by any views of ſelf-intereſt or by any conceited notions of knowledge, but proceed as out of a pure and upright heart: *Secondly* that the *exertion of the faculties* of men ſhould correſpond with their intentions, that both the words of their lips and of their pens, as well as the works of their hands, ſhould be conſcientiouſly guided by the purity of their intentions: and alſo *thirdly* that both of thoſe preceding qualifications ſhould be directed by a clear *conviction of their heads* and underſtanding. The propriety of this admonition is evident; for purity of intention is not of itſelf a ſufficient guide to action; becauſe men may mean well, yet through indiſcretion or ignorance may nevertheleſs act ill; therefore St. Paul adds in the text as a third and concluſive qualification, neceſſary to give

force

force and effect to the former two, "that Chriſtians ſhould have a faith unfeigned," that is, a clear conviction of their underſtanding and of their rational powers concerning the nature and excellence of the Chriſtian ſpeculative doctrine as well as practical commandment, ſo far at leaſt as they tend to promote thoſe duties of men, comprehended under the word charity. Faith, belief and rational conviction are only different degrees of the ſame operations of the mind and intellectual faculties, founded on ſuch competent evidence, as men are able to obtain in every caſe, ſuch as they are generally guided by in life, and ſuch as is ſuitable to the nature of a revealed religion: this then is plainly a third neceſſary qualification to promote the end of the Chriſtian Commandment*. Where any of theſe three qualifications are wanting in a Chriſtian teacher or writer; where the intention of the

* I underſtand the Greek word Πιστις as meaning *perſuaſion* or *conviction* of any kind, and not as reſtrained to the more limited ſenſe of *Faith:* it is indeed generally, if not always, rendered by *Faith* in our tranſlation; but this ſenſe, I apprehend, was adopted by our tranſlators chiefly, becauſe they found *Fides* in the Latin vulgate: but neither the Latin nor Engliſh word ſeem ſufficiently to expreſs the extenſive meaning of the Greek word. *Conviction* is that approbation of the mind ariſing from the fulleſt evidence, which it is poſſible for human rea-

 ſon

the heart is not pure and ſincere in its ſearch after truth; where the reaſoning of the tongue

ſon to receive, ſuch as ſenſible evidence by the eyes or ears, or by ſelf-evident truths, or ſuch demonſtrative concluſions as are deduced from ſelf-evident truths in conjunction with ſenſible ones, as in mathematics, and ſuch ſciences as are connected with them, i. e. aſtromony, &c.; which evidence is by all conſidered to be *certain* and *indubitable*. *Perſuaſion* ariſes from the next degree of evidence to that producing *conviction*; and is derived from *very probable* proofs only, ſuch as in oratory, hiſtory and in thoſe ſciences, which the ancients called σλοχαστικαι, wherein we can only approximate to truth, and indeed in moſt of the concerns of life. *Faith* is both in popular language and alſo by Mr. Lock conſidered as the approbation, which the mind gives, not to truths of which it is capable to judge itſelf, but which it acquieſces in upon the credit and truſt it has in ſome other perſon's evidence and knowledge. But there are no ſuch diſtinctions to be made concerning the greek word Πισλις, this equally and indifferently means every one of theſe kinds of approbation or perſuaſion; and not only every kind of conviction itſelf, but alſo ſtill farther every kind of *proof* or *evidence*, which produces that conviction. Thus Quintilian ſhews, that it was uſed to ſignify every kind of *evidence*, which could be produced before a court of juſtice. Αποδειξις *(demonſtratio)* eſt evidens probatio—per ea quæ *certa* ſunt, *fidem* dubiis afferens, neque enim certa incertis declarantur: hæc *omnia generaliter* πισλεις appellant; quod etſi propria interpretatione dicere *fidem* poſſumus, apertius tamen *probationem* interpretabimur. 5. 10. Demoſthenes uſes πισλιν επιτιθεναι, *fidem dare*, *jurare* to ſignify oaths, which are reckoned among the ſtrongeſt kinds of evidence: and Ariſtotle employs πισλεις to mean proofs even of an aſtronomic kind by ocular obſervations

tongue and pen is not conſcientiouſly guided by ſuch a purity of intention; or where both of them are not directed by a clear conviction of one's own head; the neceſſary conſequence muſt be, that inſtead of convincing others to their edification, a man will himſelf ſwerve from the end of the Chriſtian commandment, and be turned aſide unto vain jangling and uninſtructive diſputation; which tend only to pervert the cauſe of truth, and to perplex both himſelf and all others.

The juſtneſs of this admonition of St. Paul concerning the neceſſity of theſe three qualifications in the text to guard againſt the abuſe of the talent of diſputation, chriſtianity

ſervations (*de Cælo*. 2. 12.) Quintilian, we ſee thought *Fides* of too limited a ſenſe to expreſs πίστις, why then ſhould it be tyed down in Scripture to the ſtill more limited ſenſe of *faith*, without including all kinds of perſuaſion or conviction? I fear, that both unbelievers and enthuſiaſts have drawn unwarrantable concluſions from the very reſtrained ſenſe of our word *faith*: for while unbelievers on the one hand have contended hence, that the evidence of Chriſtianity depends on implicit faith, not on argument or rational conviction; Enthuſiaſts on the other hand have equally contended, that a chriſtian is able to atone for the badneſs of his actions by the ſtrength of his faith, as if they thought themſelves entitled to the moſt merit in believing, wherever they found the leaſt evidence and conviction; otherwiſe one cannot well conceive what merit they can claim from believing, where the evidence of itſelf, if fairly conſidered, cannot fail to produce conviction.

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has had repeated cauſe to acknowledge in all ages from its beginning: It has ſuſtained a variety of attacks from different quarters, which through want of ſome one or all of theſe three advantages in its adverſaries, have been attended with no better ſucceſs, than to convince the intelligent part of mankind, that though truth may be miſrepreſented, yet it cannot be altogether ſubverted by the perverſe diſputings of men, which the Apoſtle here ſtyles vain jangling. To enumerate the different and oppoſite conduct of the ſeveral adverſaries of chriſtianity in different ages would require too much time; it is ſufficient to obſerve in general, that having in the beginning of the preſent century been beaten out of all their pretences for abſolute unbelief concerning the origin, nature and utility of the Chriſtian Revelation, they ſeem now deſirous, at the cloſe of this memorable century, to adopt a kind of compromiſe with chriſtianity; for they now affect to ſtyle themſelves rational chriſtians and philoſophers: that is, they pretend to retain ſome parts of the Chriſtian Revelation, ſuch as they judge moſt proper; but to reject other parts of it; and thus they would form ſome new and peculiar Chriſtian ſyſtem of their own, differing however according to each man's own philoſophic fancy.

Juſt

Juſt as the Electic ſect of philoſophers in prophane times adhered altogether to no one philoſophic ſect, but ſelected ſome of their tenets out of one ſect, and ſome out of another, and thus formed a motley and incoherent mixture out of all: or juſt as the moſt antient Chriſtian ſect, called the Gnoſtics, intermixed Chriſtian and Heathen opinions together; ſo in like manner our modern ſect of rational Chriſtian Philoſophers purſue a ſimilar plan, but with juſt as little ſucceſs; and this becauſe they daily prove themſelves to want ſome one or all of thoſe three qualifications mentioned in the text, either a pure *intention* of the heart to ſearch out truth in their ſpeculations; or elſe a *conſcientious adherence* to the reality of facts and to the right ſenſe of words to which they refer; or elſe a clear *conviction* of their own underſtanding concerning the origin and progreſs of chriſtianity, the nature of its ſpeculative doctrine or its practical tendency to promote the end of the revealed commandment. Hence accordingly this lateſt claſs of philoſophic Chriſtians is found to end in no more convincing and certain concluſions than the many others, who have gone before them, under the different names of Arians, Sabellians and ſuch like: in which lateſt phiſophic claſs Dr. Prieſtly has rendered himſelf the moſt conſpicuous in his Hiſtory of the

Corruptions

Corruptions of Chriſtianity. But as this revived plan of the ancient Gnoſtics, in rejecting or admitting juſt as much and no more of the orthodox Chriſtian tenets, than ſhall ſuit each man's own ſpeculative opinion, could not be recommended to the public except by the aid of miſrepreſentation; ſo accordingly we find, that our modern philoſophers have dealt as largely in this way as that more antient Gnoſtic ſect, at the beginning of Chriſtianity: the antient ſectaries, we are informed by Euſebius, altered and corrupted the *words* of Scripture in order to make them ſuit with their own opinions *; and the modern philoſophic ſect do much the ſame thing; for they alter the *obvious ſenſe* of ſcriptural words, in order to make them favour their own conceptions. Some portion of genius however is neceſſary to render even miſrepreſentation itſelf plauſible; accordingly this claſs of writers is found powerful enough in the faculty of perplexing a cauſe, in the art of words and the talent of diſputation; the produce of which medley of ability and infirmity has too often a very impoſing appearance in its favor with thoſe readers, whoſe own inattention has diſabled them from diſcerning the wide difference, between the talent of ſeparating

* Hiſt. Eccl. 5. c. ult.

truth

truth from falſehood, and that of confounding both together. The inveſtigation of truth is a ſlow paced labour of patience, which gains its object only by degrees; but the art of confuſion proves moſt ſucceſsful, when like a ruſhing muddy torrent, it can level all diſtinctions and boundaries in a moment; and of courſe by thus diſdaining all confinement, it cannot but often turn aſide from thoſe three qualifications neceſſary to be attended to by a teacher of mankind, the intention of the mind, the truth of one's aſſertions and facts, and a clear conviction of the head concerning the neceſſary concluſions reſulting from any argument. Yet this abuſe of the art of language and reaſoning, though a misfortune, is a misfortune incident to human nature only in common with the abuſe of all other bleſſings of our exiſtence; birth and wealth and ſtrength, commerce and government, power and liberty, all ſocial and all liberal arts are liable to the ſame abuſes; and by the poſeſſors of them ſwerving from propriety in the application, they may be diverted from the beneficial ends intended by ſuch human advantages. This misfortune ariſes from the frailty of our nature, ſo that the very ſame means, the ſame art of words and perſuaſion, by which Chriſtianity was at firſt

preached and eſtabliſhed, may be now employed to perplex and undermine it: but intelligent men will diſcern the difference between the right uſe and the abuſe of any human qualification; to define exactly the limits between the two is impoſſible, yet there will generally be ſome inherent ſtrong marks, whereby they may be known; "by their fruits ye ſhall know them."

With reſpect indeed to the *intention* of the heart, this by being latent within, is the moſt difficult to diſcover, as well as the moſt diſagreeable to diſplay to others; yet even this will in ſome degree be manifeſted of itſelf by its effects, juſt as an intent in law is manifeſted by the overt acts which follow it. Hence therefore wherever we meet with continual miſrepreſentations in any writer, and theſe all leaning the ſame way, all in favour of a man's own cauſe, how can any one fail being tempted to conclude, that theſe muſt have been intended, and not be the effects of mere over-ſight and accident? The ſame again when every fact or teſtimony is omitted, which makes againſt a writer, and thoſe only produced which are favourable to him; or when we often meet with a more than ordinary inſolidity of reaſoning in thoſe ſame perſons, who on other occaſions reaſon with juſtneſs and accuracy;

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in ſuch caſes candor muſt arreſt its favourable judgment of a man's intention, and even Chriſtian charity itſelf, which teaches us to hope all things and to believe all things in favour of others, muſt then, I fear, ſtop ſhort at hope, without advancing to belief.

So alſo, in regard to the *ſecond* article of a *conſcientious exertion of one's faculties*, had thoſe writers in every age, who have turned their philoſophic enquiries to the nature of the Chriſtian doctrine concerning the deity, had they kept in view as they ought, the admonitions of St. Paul in the text, they would not have abuſed, as they too often have, the gracious gifts of God, by turning the arts of language and reaſoning into mere arts of perplexed diſputation and vain jangling. Thus for inſtance among the many philoſophic diſputants, who have ſucceeded each other ſince the commencement of Chriſtianity, two of the moſt conſpicuous claſſes (as I ſaid before) are thoſe of the ancient Gnoſtics, and our modern rational Chriſtian Philoſophers, whom I may call a modern ſect of Gnoſtics; for they have both affected the ſame ſtyle and title in pretending, that they alone of all men deſerve the name of clear ſighted *learned* men. That ancient ſect of Gnoſtics, being ſtruck with admiration at the rational notions concerning

the Deity in the Chriſtian Religion, as well as its ſolid morality (both which have indeed been the admiration of every infidel ever ſince) yet being deluded by a conceited opinion concerning their deep learning and philoſophy, they pretended, that the orthodox Chriſtian doctrine concerning the divinity of Chriſt was not ſufficiently ſublime; they undertook therefore to amend and improve it by the addition of philoſophic opinions of their own, in order to render it more complex and remote from all vulgar notions, and more ſuitable (they thought) to a *merely ſpeculative* turn of mind. Our modern Gnoſtics have manifeſted a ſimilar inclination to alter and amend the orthodox tenets of Chriſtianity, eſpecially with reſpect to the divinity of Chriſt; and from a ſimilar motive, a pretence of correcting vulgar notions, in order to render them more conformable to their own *ſpeculative* refinements, rather than to any greater *practical* uſe, but which they dignify however with the title of rational and philoſophic improvements: while in fact the pretended corrections by both ſects amount to nothing better than doubtful conjectures of their own, in oppoſition to the plain evidence of words and facts in ſcripture, according to the beſt critical interpretation of the Greek language now within our power; and this

this confirmed by its being agreeable to the ſenſe, which (as we find) was put upon the ſame ſcriptural phraſes, while Greek was a living language. In one point however the ancient and modern ſects have differed, although they agree in ſo many others: they differ in this, that the ancient Gnoſtics endeavoured to enoble the dignity of the Chriſt in a manner, they thought, more conſiſtent with divinity than among the orthodox themſelves; whereas our modern Gnoſtics of the preſent times take the oppoſite road, and ſeek to abaſe the perſon of Chriſt, to deprive him of all divinity and reduce him to a mere mortal man. Now for confirmation of this their opinion concerning the mere humanity of Chriſt, the latter pretend to appeal, not merely to the words of Scripture, but alſo to the belief of that ancient ſect of Gnoſtics and other Chriſtian ſectaries of the firſt ages; than which a more ill-founded miſrepreſentation was never attempted to be offered to the public: for, as I obſerved before, the ancient Gnoſtics and other ſects ſought to exalt the ~~divinity~~ dignity of the pre-exiſtent Chriſt higher than any others, and neither they, nor in fact any one Chriſtian ſect whatever of the firſt ages, ever held any ſuch opinion as the mere humanity of Chriſt; I mean in that ſenſe, in which it is underſtood by our modern

modern Gnoſtic Philoſophers, that is, as if humanity extended throughout the whole life of Jeſus, from his incarnation to his paſſion. What the Gnoſtics held was this; they ſought to exalt the dignity of the Chriſt; and they conceived it to be an abaſement of that dignity, for the pre-exiſtent divine Chriſt to be incarnate and born like man; therefore they pretended, that Jeſus was indeed mere man from his incarnation to his baptiſm; but at that time by the deſcent of the Holy Spirit of God, an union was formed between the pre-exiſtent divinity of the Chriſt or Savior and the humanity of Jeſus; which was diſſolved again, as they ſuppoſed, and for a ſimilar reaſon before his paſſion. The very ſame likewiſe were the notions of every other antient Chriſtian ſect, which in any reſpect whatever held the mere humanity of Jeſus; namely that this ſeparate humanity continued only for a time, that is, until his baptiſm and no longer: and there is no ſufficient proof extant in any author whatever, that the Nazarenes, or Ebionites differed in this reſpect from the other Chriſtian ſects, as may be eaſily proved to the ſatisfaction of any impartial man; nay indeed it is expreſſly pointed out by Epiphanius, that the opinion held by theſe ſects concerning the humanity of Jeſus was either nearly or exactly

the

the ſame with that of the Gnoſtics. If this fact be true, then it is plain, that all theſe ſects differed from the orthodox chiefly with reſpect to the time, when the union of divinity and humanity took place, not with reſpect to the fact itſelf and the univerſal belief of the reality of ſuch an union, as well among the Chriſtian ſectaries as the orthodox; the latter conceiving this union to take place at the incarnation, the Gnoſtics and other ſects not until the baptiſm of Jeſus.* Notwithſtanding this our philoſophic Chriſtians have not ſcrupled to affirm and have repeatedly

* I uſe *Orthodox* in oppoſition only to *ſectary*, and do not mean the particular tenets of any preſent eſtabliſhed Church. The evidence on which the above aſſertions are made will be collected more at large in the 4th vol. of *Critical Obſervations on books antient and modern*, ſold by B. White, Fleet-ſtreet. At preſent it may be ſufficient to obſerve, that with reſpect to the Gnoſtics it is proved by almoſt every chapter in Ireneus, that they held the divine pre-exiſtence of the Chriſt and Saviour and his union with Jeſus at Baptiſm: that the Nazarenes and Ebionites held nearly the ſame tenets will be plain from the following paſſages in Epiphanius. Nazaræos Ebion proxime conſequitur, *eadem* que cum illis *dogmata* tenuit; quod horrendum monſtrum et multiplex——rurſus ad exitium humani generis erupit: licet ex illorum diciplina prodierit, nonnulla tamen, præter-quam ab illis doceantur aſſeruit, &c. In giving an abſtract of the contents of the Goſpel uſed by the Ebionites, he ſays it contained to this effect "Cum aſcendiſſet (Jeſus) ex aqua, aperti ſunt cœli et vidit ſpiritum dei ſanctum columbæ ſpecie deſcendentis et intrantis in ſeſe, et vox reddita de cœlo dicens,

dicens, *Tu es filius meus dilectus, in te mihi complacui*, et iterum, *Ego hodie genui te* [εγω σημερον γεγεννηκα σε]— nunc ad inchoatam de Ebionitis narrationem regredior— Jesum, ut diximus, *merum hominem* exstitisse putant, in eoque resedisse Christum, qui columbæ specie sit illapsus, cum eoque conjunctus [εν ειδει περιστερας κατα βεβηκοτα και συναφθεντα αυτω] id quod aliis insuper Hæreticis placuisse reperio. Ita Jesum ex utriusque parentis semine prognatum ipsum deveniſse Christum. Rursum vero negant ipsum esse *hominem* ex responso salvatoris "Hi sunt fratres mei et mater mea, qui faciunt voluntatem *Patris mei*." Hinc ille præstigiis instructus Ebion varias se in effigies deformat, ut esse monstrum quoddam appareat sicut ab initio dictum est. By Epiphanius's giving at the beginning the same name of *monstrum* to those tenets, which Ebion held in common with the Nazarenes, it should seem, that the union of the pre-existent Christ with Jesus at his baptism was one of those which were common to both sects; he thus goes on. Duos a Deo constitutos asserunt Christum et Diabolum; Jesum vero electum fuisse, itaque dei filium in Electione appellatum, quia Christus in eum delapsus est columbæ figura. Negant vero a deo patre ipsum fuisse genitum sed creatum [κ φασκουσι γεγενηκοτα αλλα εκτισθαι] sicut unum ex Archangelis, majorem autem illis existentem, et *dominantem* [κυριουν]α] super Angelos et omnia a creatore formata———Qui Ebionitæ vocati sunt, secus ac Ebion ipse, nescio quam in cœlo virtutem ex Deo obtinuisse Filium asserunt. *De Hæres.* Now let readers determine as they please concerning the degree of divinity, which Ebion attributed to the Christ either before or after the union with Jesus at baptism; yet thus much is clear, that he did not consider Jesus as being *mere man* any longer than his baptism: and there is no reason to think, that this was not likewise the tenet of the Nazarenes. Another article also appears equally clear from Epiphanius, namely that the later Ebionites after Elxai went still farther, and maintained, that Jesus was born mere man of Mary only; for that the Christ had descended and become united with Adam and

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repeatedly exerted their pens to maintain, that not only the first Christian sectaries disbelieved in the divinity of Jesus, but also even the greater part of the primitive Christians themselves; and hence they have sought occasion to accuse orthodox teachers as corruptors of Christianity. If we could suppose, that they knew they were asserting a fact, which was not true, and that they purposely

several others, and by means of the holy spirit of God that with Jesus at his *incarnation*, as is related in what follows the last sentence above quoted, and is confirmed by the account of the Ebionites in Eusebius. As to Artemon, Theodotus, Beryllus, Photinus and those called by Epiphanius *Alogi* in general, they were all followers of the Gnostics and Ebionities with some variations, in metaphysical expressions at least, more perhaps than in substance, and we find the same tenet of an union of the Christ with Jesus pervading them all. Epiphanius begins his account of Theodotus, by saying that he was a shoot [αποσπασμα] from the heresy of the Alogi: for which reason he enters but little into his opinions, having before often stated the *common* opinions of all those sects. But in the extracts from the doctrine of Theodotus made by Clemens of Alexandria and published along with that author, we there find clearly, that Theodotus also held the pre-existence of the Christ and his union with Jesus at Baptism, like the others: and indeed all, who held this doctrine, of necessity supposed the Christ to be divine in some degree or other both before the baptism and after; so that the modern opinion concerning the humanity of Jesus through life, has not the least countenance in its favour from the tenets of any one of the antient sectaries, how much less then from the antient orthodox Christians?

miſrepreſented the evidence concerning it; this conduct would verify the importance of the Apoſtle's advice concerning the neceſſity of that *ſecond* qualification, of a *conſcientious exertion of our faculties* to preſerve ourſelves free from diſſimulation or concealment, when not only the truth, but the whole truth ought to be produced: and it would at the ſame time ſerve as an example, how often truth at the laſt comes out, and makes a juſt diſtinction between the uſe and abuſe of the talent of diſputation. However, I make no ſuch preſumption, and am ſincerely convinced, that our philoſophic ſect had no knowledge of the above mentioned circumſtance in the belief of the ancient ſectaries, viz. that they confined the humanity of Jeſus to the time of his exiſtence before his baptiſm; but they certainly ought to have known it, and alſo to have been very certain, that they knew every thing concerning the ſubject, before they proceeded ſuch lengths, as to rank orthodox teachers among the corruptors of Chriſtianity. Although this error may have ariſen from a haſty inattention in thoſe who at firſt propoſed it, yet it muſt be a leſs pardonable inattention in others to have adopted it without ſufficient examination, as appears indeed but too plainly both in this and many other inſtances;

ſtances; and leſs excuſeable ſtill if thoſe examples of indiſcretion ſhould induce future writers of the ſame claſs to overlook the miſtake on purpoſe, and thus all become aſſiſtants in ſome degree toward miſleading the public and turning perhaps many from Chriſtian belief of any kind.

This miſtake then of theirs, proves the propriety of attending to the *third* qualification recommended by the Apoſtle, a very extenſive knowledge of the head, and a clear *conviction of the underſtandings* of men concerning all the ſpeculative doctrines as well as hiſtoric facts relative to Chriſtianity, before any of them be brought to public cenſure: it will alſo ſerve as a ſpecimen how often by the abuſe of the talent of diſputation, truth and falſehood may be confounded together even by thoſe who do not intend it. For indeed what a ſuperſtructure of error have our philoſophic Chriſtians built upon that above mentioned miſtake of theirs as the foundation; the whole of which falls to the ground at once, ſo ſoon as the foundation is taken away, by rectifying their miſconception of that ſingle fact concerning the humanity of Jeſus? If, for inſtance, they pretend to find any difficulty or matter of objection againſt the belief of an union of divinity and humanity in the perſon of Jeſus; yet they

do not in the leaſt remove the ſuppoſed difficulty by having recourſe to the creeds of the antient ſectaries, thoſe favourite pure and primitive Chriſtians: for they all believed in the ſame union; and the difference of time when they ſuppoſed that union to take place, cannot poſſibly make the leaſt difference in a conception of the reality of the fact itſelf. Moreover, if it were actually true (as they contend) that a belief in the humanity of Jeſus had been as univerſal among the firſt Chriſtians as they pretend; yet if this alſo was reſtrained to the time before the baptiſm of Jeſus, it can give no aſſiſtance to their own cauſe in maintaining the mere humanity of Jeſus after his baptiſm: nay on the contrary by its thus appearing, that the whole tide of belief among excommunicated ſectaries themſelves was in favour of the divinity of Jeſus after his baptiſm; this becomes a certain proof, that no ſuch opinion as that of the mere humanity of Jeſus during the whole of his life, could have poſſibly prevailed among the orthodox Chriſtians of thoſe ages. And ſtill farther, if appeal to the antient ſectaries, concerning their ſuppoſed belief of the humanity of Jeſus after his baptiſm, be brought forward by themſelves as a proof of the ſame belief among the orthodox, ſurely, they will not be ſo inconſiſtent, as now to

change

change ſides, and (ſince we have proved that thoſe ſectaries believed in the divinity of Jeſus) refuſe to admit this as any proof of the belief of the moſt ancient Chriſtians in the ſame fact. How much inſolidity of reaſoning then and how many falſe concluſions have followed, through an indiſcreet abuſe of the talent of diſputation, from the miſconception of a ſingle fact; which requires nothing more to rectify it than to read Ireneus's account of the Gnoſtics, Epiphanius's Hiſtory of the Ebionites, and the extracts from Theodotus made by Clemens of Alexandria! If indeed any one ſhould read only Auguſtin's Epitome of hereſies, he might at firſt be inclined to conclude, that ſeveral of the Chriſtian ſectaries maintained the humanity of Jeſus throughont the whole of his life: but it ſhould be conſidered, that Auguſtin's brevity, by contracting often times his account of a whole hereſy into a ſingle ſentence or two, neceſſarily led him to notice only ſome one ſtriking feature of each ſect, which diſtinguiſhed it from the orthodox. If then a reader ſhall have recourſe to the above-mentioned other writers, who have treated of the tenets of thoſe ſectaries more in detail; he will find that the Gnoſtics, Nazarenes, Ebionites, Theodotians and all their followers down to Photinus, had no conception of ever extending

ing the mere humanity of Jeſus to any later period than his baptiſm: and that the ſame principle pervaded them all, namely that of enobling, not abaſing the dignity of the Chriſt; although indeed they modified it in ſeveral different ways, or at leaſt delivered their ſentiments in ſuch a different manner, that if they themſelves had formed no clear diſtinctions in ſenſe, yet at leaſt they did diſtinguiſh in metaphyſical expreſſions. Now do theſe examples afford any favourable ſpecimen of the critical, hiſtorical, or argumentative attention of our moderns, or any good preſumption, that they would be able to interpret the words of Scripture itſelf with greater accuracy, than they have diſplayed in theſe inſtances? or with more critical knowledge of language than orthodox teachers, or better than thoſe ancient Chriſtians themſelves, whoſe explanation of ſcriptural phraſes have been tranſmitted down to us, and were made at firſt while Greek was yet a living language? Upon the whole does the modern philoſophic ſect appear to have any good reaſon to claim, that a clearer *conviction of their heads and underſtanding* is attached to the exertion of their own pens and faculties than among orthodox teachers? We may ſurely at the very worſt be able to ſay with the

the Poet *Iliacos intra muros peccatur et extra.*

In truth I am inclined to think, that the *policy* of our modern Gnoſtics is preferable to their accuracy, *to the conviction of their own underſtandings*, and to the force of their arguments againſt others. For they being willing to retain ſome parts of the Chriſtian Doctrine, while they reject other parts; but being not willing to expoſe themſelves to the odium of preſumption in rejecting any portion of the Goſpel, and directly ſetting up their own philoſophic ſpeculation as being wiſer than Revelation itſelf; they could find no more ſpecious method to ſecure their own opinions from public cenſure, than by denying the opinions of the orthodox to be contained in the words of ſcripture, or to have been believed in by the primitive Chriſtians: and they could find no better method to prove this, than by giving a different ſenſe to the words of ſcripture from that in which they always have, and ought to be underſtood according to the moſt critical ſkill in the Greek language; and alſo by greedily catching hold of the ſuppoſed ſtate of belief in the firſt Chriſtian ages, and among the firſt Chriſtian Sectaries as an argument in their favour. This may be political indeed, but is it not unjuſt to one's neighbour? Is it candid

candid and impartial? Is it conſiſtent with the end of the Chriſtian Commandment, or with ſincere enquirers after truth as they profeſs themſelves to be? or is it not rather the ſpecious refuge of ſuch, as manifeſt an *intention* to turn the art of reaſoning into a wilderneſs of diſputation, in order to loſe truth in the midſt of it, inſtead of helping us to find it? whereby they become the better able to conceal their own preſumption in attempting to reduce chriſtianity to a philoſophic ſyſtem, by ſo puzzling and perplexing the cauſe, that ſuperficial readers of modern times may not perhaps be eaſily able to find a right path through the labyrinth. But is this the part of men of real knowledge, who are to mend the underſtandings of us alll, and to mend Chriſtianity likewiſe? whoſe profound ſpeculations profeſs to deal out Chriſtian truths never heard of in the firſt Chriſtian ages; and who boaſt of being able to give light to them, that now ſit in darkneſs, in the ſhadow of death and religious corruption. Alas, true philoſophy teaches a different leſſon, and true philoſophy does indeed demand the reſpect of all reaſonable men; but it no longer deſerves that name, than while it purſues its proper object, that of leading us to more certain knowledge and wiſdom than we poſſeſſed before, and not merely of exchanging one doubtful truth for another:

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when directed to its true object it will teach us, that in all our inveſtigations concerning the nature of the divine being and Chriſt, man's reaſon is ſoon loſt in the immenſity of the ſubject, and muſt at laſt repoſe its deepeſt ſpeculations in the boſom of a rational humility; it may therefore juſt as well begin with a Chriſtian humility, and this would have led towards candour and juſtice to the Chriſtian labours of others. For between Chriſtian and philoſophic humility there is this difference, that the Chriſtian begins his religious ſtudies with it; but with the ſame humility the pride of the moſt ſublime philoſophy, if it proves to be indeed rational to the very laſt, muſt end; it muſt end with the ſame humble acknowledgement, that the nature as well as the ways of God are ſo much above the underſtanding of man, that they can be nothing better learned from philoſphy than from what is written in the Revelation of God himſelf. But to ſuppoſe, that this Revelation was never rightly underſtood even by thoſe who heard it from the mouths of the Apoſtles themſelves or their immediate ſucceſſors, is to ſuppoſe, that the divine ſpirit of truth, which promiſed to lead Chriſtians into all truths, did its work ſo imperfectly, that it is reſerved for the ſpirit of modern philoſophy to ſet matters at rights

again: which even if it could be ſuppoſed without ſhaking the whole authority of Revelation, yet at the ſame time it excuſes orthodox Chriſtian teachers for having retained thoſe original Chriſtian errors. Our modern Gnoſtics then might juſt as well have aſſerted explicitly at once, that though for decency ſake they place thoſe errors to the account of Chriſtian teachers, yet the defects, of which they complain, are defects in the original plan of Chriſtianity itſelf; and which our modern Apoſtles have undertaken to correct. But it was plainly the buſineſs of Chriſtian teachers only to preach that doctrine moſt obviouſly taught by the words of the antient Goſpel; which was received as the true ſenſe of them in the firſt and pureſt Chriſtian ages, which may be even at preſent traced back to the earlieſt times in the writings of Chriſtian authors ſtill extant, and which is confirmed by hiſtory as well as by a critical ſkill in the Greek language: for the inveſtigation of the true doctrine of Chriſt is an hiſtoric and critical rather than a philoſophic ſubject of enquiry. It was the buſineſs of Chriſtian teachers only to make known what Chriſtianity actually was at its firſt publication by Chriſt and his Apoſtles; not to enquire what may be now made of it accord-

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ing to any man's opinion in order to ſuit his own particular taſte; nor yet what our rational Chriſtians may think it ought to have been, in caſe their philoſophic advice had been conſulted. Chriſtian teachers became the hiſtorians of this revealed religion, and in order to diſcharge their truſt faithfully, they were forced to confine themſelves to the truth of facts, and to the ſenſe of phraſes, as they actually found them to have been underſtood by the earlieſt Diſciples of Chriſt: had they taken upon themſelves to adulterate Chriſtianity with opinions foreign to it; and as Philo-Judæus did in the Moſaic religion, to aſſimilate it to the Greek Philoſophy, ſo that the Jews themſelves could no longer know their own religion, when exhibited in his writings; Chriſtian teachers might in that caſe have been juſtly accuſed of having handled the word of God deceitfully; and our philoſophic ſect themſelves would have been the firſt to make the accuſation. If then there be any tenets, which philoſophers can reaſonably conſider as errors ſtill inherent in reformed Chriſtianity, yet candor ought to acknowledge, that they are ſo interwoven with the very body of it, or at leaſt aroſe in ſo early an age, that it was impoſſible for Chriſtian teachers to diſtinguiſh them with certainty, much leſs to ſeperate them from

original Chriſtianity. But even taking Chriſtian belief as it now is and has been, whether the good ends already produced by it and which it is daily producing more and more, would be promoted and not rather retarded by any new reformations derived from Philoſophical Theory, this is a matter too full of danger in practice to induce prudent men to try the event, and too full of doubt and difficulty even in ſpeculation to induce reaſonable men to attempt it. For who indeed can hope to collect ſuch a new Chriſtian ſyſtem out of the Goſpel, as ſhall be able to give better ſatisfaction to the different claſſes of men, if they do but attend to the fate of all the philoſophic reformations of orthodoxy by the Arians and others ſince the beginning of Chriſtianity; none of which have long ſurvived their reſpective authors, or been received with ſatisfaction by poſterity? But thus much all men may ſee moſt clearly, that if any one ſhall compare the temper of modern times in war or peace, in the principles of commerce, ſociety or legiſlation, with the manners of the moſt civilized Ancients in prophane ages, they will appear to differ as much as two different climates, or as the roughneſs of winter differs from the mildneſs of ſummer: to what can this be aſcribed but to the benevolent influence of the

Goſpel

Goſpel in its preſent ſtate with all its infirmities; which has been now ſo long about our path and about our bed and ſo intermixed in all our ways, in our thoughts and our inſtitutions, that through the medium of religion it has by degrees brought men to the uſe of reaſon. Men of experience then and practice in the concerns of life will perhaps know where to ſtop, although ſpeculative philoſophers ſhould not; and while they find themſelves ſo well at preſent, while they thus feel ſo many good effects, they will look back with comfort on that lamentation in Xenophon concerning the unruly wills of mankind in antient times. "Alas how much more difficult is it to govern man than all other animals!" New ſyſtems of Chriſtianity therefore will be probably left to thoſe who dignify themſelves with the title of rational Chriſtians; but who at the ſame time prove themſelves to be inconſiſtent philoſophers, while they thus apply the ſpeculations of reaſon to the ſubject of divine truths, concerning which no man can poſſibly obtain any knowledge by the uſe and conviction of reaſon only without the information of Revelation; and this was the very cauſe why the antient philoſophers in prophane times ran into ſo many extravagant notions upon the ſame ſubject: Can the Moderns hope to

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do better in the preſent age of inconſiſtency, of viſionary reformations, metaphyſical chicanery and popular deluſion; which may probably produce as many bankrupts in Philoſophic Theories of Chriſtianity, as we daily ſee produced in commercial and political ſpeculations? So long then as we confine ourſelves ſtrictly to teach the words and ſenſe of ſcripture, as they have been fixed by the doctrine received in the earlieſt ages, we cannot but be thus far right; and even if the whole ſyſtem of Chriſtianity itſelf could be proved in the wrong, yet we ourſelves at leaſt cannot, who are only the faithful teachers of what the nature of that revealed law was at its firſt propagation, and not the formers of it. In the execution alſo of this our taſk we are employed upon a ſubject, which happily is within the compaſs of human underſtanding, that is in the inveſtigation of the fact itſelf, what the doctrine of the revealed Goſpel was at its origin and whether it be contained in the words of ſcripture; the latter is to be learned from the Goſpel itſelf and a critical ſkill in the Greek language, the former from hiſtory and the earlieſt Chriſtian writers ſtill extant: in theſe points no man can fail to arrive at a ſufficient *conviction* of his intellectual faculties, in caſe he does but make a *conſcientious uſe* of them;

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and does not firſt haſtily take up new opinions, before he has duly examined them, and then *intentionally* make all the teſtimonies of antient writers bend to his own erroneous preconceptions. We ſee therefore to what degree the *conviction of our underſtanding* can arrive on theſe ſubjects, that it is founded on the moſt rational principles of inveſtigation concerning *facts*, and the teſtimony of revelation concerning *truths*, not upon philoſophic ſpeculations concerning the internal nature of thoſe truths reſpecting the Deity; for indeed the things of heaven who can or hath ſearched out? In the laſt point Chriſtians, Philoſophers and all muſt equally ſubmit either with a religious or with a rational humility, as being a ſubject equally above the underſtandings of us all, in whatever different manner it ſhall be modified. Now on ſuch a review, if the teſtimonies to the facts of the Chriſtian Revelation, and if thoſe articles of its doctrine, which are within the compaſs of our reaſon, ſhall appear to be of ſuch a rational kind, as to juſtify our *faith* in thoſe revealed truths which are above our underſtanding; we are at the ſame time *certain* alſo that no man can poſſibly arrive by mere ſpeculation at any *conviction of his underſtanding* to the contrary of thoſe divine truths thus revealed to us.

It is therefore to be much lamented, that any abuſe of the talent of diſputation, notwithſtanding St. Paul's admonition in the text, ſhould ſtill ſubſiſt concerning religious ſubjects in this enlightned age, and one which is truly philoſophic with reſpect to all merely human ſubjects of knowledge, ſo that neither the more rational temper of the times, nor yet the admonition of ſcripture ſhould have rendered enquiries concerning religion conformable in fact to that ſpirit of truth, which is too often only profeſſed in words. This doubtleſs ariſes from the too great warmth of literary zeal; but as ſcripture teaches, that the wrath of man worketh not the righteouſneſs of God, ſo neither can a momentary diſplay of an artful talent at diſputation tend either to promote the end of the Chriſtian commandment or ultimately of a man's own ſatisfaction, whenever it ſhall deviate from truth. For indeed what a poor reward is the vain glory of an aptneſs at perverſe diſputings in recompence for the long and painful cultivation of that particle of human reaſon, which diſtinguiſhes us from Savages! What an unworthy application is it of ſuperior capacity and learning in any man, to be able to make a bad cauſe a good one, and to turn the beſt cauſe into a bad one, by confounding the underſtandings of men!

men! If no better effects have often ariſen from the ſuperior parts of many writers, it is on account of their having made a ſhipwreck of all by ſwerving from thoſe qualifications in the text of pure intentions of the heart in the ſearch of truth, a conſcientious conduct in the exerciſe of their tongues and pens, and a clear conviction in their own heads: but when aſſiſted by theſe qualifications truth ſhall be indeed their aim, and ſincerity ſhall guide their words, then the reſt of their fellow-creatures muſt ever receive ſome profit either from their labours, or at leaſt from their errors. Life itſelf alſo is too ſhort, the buſineſs of it too urgent, the duties of life too many, and its comforts too few, for any of us to throw away the precious moments of health and time in perplexed diſputes and vain jangling. When daily experience proves, that there are ſtill ſo many truths to learn of importance to the welfare of man and within the compaſs of our capacities, yet ſo little leiſure to be ſtolen from the neceſſities of our being, or from the calls of our ſeveral ſtations; with what diſapprobation ought men to receive the attempts of thoſe, who ſeek to throw additional clouds of perplexity over any of the firſt principles of reaſon or religion? What a mortifying reflection after all the labours of

others added to our own, to have obtained no clearer view concerning the objects of our reſearches, than our anceſtors had long ago, inſtead of being enabled through time to emerge more and more from the darkneſs of doubt and ignorance! By the lot of humanity we riſe by ſlow degrees from a tedious *Childhood*, in which knowledge indeed is pleaſant, but ſtudy is painful: even in the next ſtage of *youth* knowledge muſt come in the ſhape of amuſement, or elſe it will come in a queſtionable ſhape: and when arrived at *manhood*, both neceſſity and inclination urge us on to the active ſcenes of life; ſo that the ſilent hours of intellectual meditation are oo often poſtponed to ſome future diſtant d y, which perhaps never does arrive at all. For our period of maturity, like the ſun aſcended to its meridian height, paſſes on with ſuch rapid haſte, that we find ourſelves far down the hill upon the *decline* of life, before we even think of where we are: Connected alſo as we muſt be with worldly cares, we muſt contract in return ſome attachment of intereſt for the objects of thoſe ſeveral cares; and either domeſtick concerns, or buſineſs and ſociety, either the converſations of the friendly world, the amuſements of the polite, or the diſputes of the political world, ſome or other will in every ſtage intervene too often,

often, and rob us of too many of thoſe vacant hours for ſtudy, which the neceſſary demands of life could really ſpare; and thus we are hurried on along the common ſtream, until at length we feel with ſorrow, that the beſt parts of *life* itſelf are *already paſt*, and then we think it too late to begin a new courſe of conduct. So that all our lives we can but juſt hold our heads above the ſurface of knowledge, at the very moments, when we moſt want a very elevated and extenſive view of it for our help. Whilſt then there are ſo many avocations through nature or faſhion, ſo many impediments to knowledge from the neceſſary courſe of things; and while theſe are augmented by the inconſiderate conduct of the world, which when it claims at our hands both education and learning, yet never conſiders the time or expence required for either; and hence after having ſpent one fortune to obtain what the public demands, we find ourſelves at laſt not poſſeſſed of fit worldly qualifications to acquire any other, at leaſt in ſuch an age as this, which expects a ſacrifice of all things to gratify the capricious humors and ſelf-importance of wealthy ignorance: whilſt there are thus ſo many diſcouragements on all ſides to the acquiſition of learning, Oh! let not thoſe, who are bleſſed

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with genius or leiſure, add ſtill another and a voluntary obſtacle in our way, derived from their own conduct alone, by perplexing the road to intellectual improvement, with unſolid principles, unfair repreſentations, improbable conjectures, and unjuſt concluſions; in ſhort with all the tricks of the mere talent of diſputation, as if they wiſhed for a return of the ages of ignorance. But rather let all, in ſeeking to advance toward the regions of intellectual light either in reaſon or religion, remember, that the end of the Chriſtian commandment is connected with practice more than ſpeculation; and that both of theſe will be beſt promoted, by ever keeping in our view the admonitions of the Apoſtle in the text, concerning a pure intention in ſearch of truth, a conſcientious exertion of our tongues and pens during the ſearch, and a clear conviction of our underſtandings, whether or not in regard to every ſubject it be within the power of human reaſon to attain to truth, or within the bounds of Chriſtian humility to attempt it by the aid of reaſon only.

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P. S. Leſt too much brevity ſhould have rendered my meaning obſcure in the firſt line of the note at p. 17, enlarge the ſentence thus, " and that by means of the Holy Spirit of God Divinity was *poſſibly* in ſome degree united with Jeſus at his incarnation, but certainly at his baptiſm."

FINIS